

# Deconstructing the Hijra Narrative: Reimagining Trans Identities through Literary Perspectives

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## ABSTRACT

The term "transgender" is not tied to an individual but rather encompasses the "Third Gender Community." This diverse community, comprising individuals referred to by various terms like Aravani, Eunuch, Hijra, Kinnar, Napumsakam, Gay, etc., faces deep-rooted prejudice in India. Despite the array of names used, India still clings to outdated forms of discrimination. In all candor, we contend that this sheds light on the lives of a community highly stigmatized and inadequately comprehended in the Indian Subcontinent. This analysis delves into the portrayal of transsexuals in Hindu Mythology and modern literature, exploring perceptions, significance, and societal acceptance. Through the lens of marginalization theory and myth concepts, this article explores the significance of transgender movements in Indian literature, the evolution of transgender representation, and the impact these narratives have on society.

**KEYWORDS:** Transgender, myth, society, oppression, struggle, challenges, literature

## INTRODUCTION

Transgenderism has been a longstanding aspect of society, evident since the Vedic period and acknowledged in various historical records such as myths, legends, and epics. The presence and importance of transgender individuals are discernible in the cultural heritage left by our ancestors. Despite being recognized legally and actively participating in various sectors, contemporary society still harbors biases against transsexuals, citing social taboos as a basis for resistance. Even as they make strides in acceptance, especially in India, a nation often identified as 'religious,' transgender individuals find themselves in a challenging position in present-day society. Literature has always played a crucial role in reflecting the social fabric of a nation and highlighting the struggles and triumphs of marginalized communities. In recent years, transgender movements in India have gained momentum, challenging societal norms and advocating for inclusivity and acceptance. Indian literature, both in its ancient scriptures and contemporary works, has embraced the transgender community, giving voice to their experiences and offering a platform for their stories to be heard.

## Methodology:

The qualitative research methodology enabled the researcher to thoroughly engage with literary texts, involving multiple readings for a comprehensive analysis of the data. This methodology is used in this work to explore the selected topic. This approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of the literary works from various character perspectives, enhancing the researcher's understanding of the material.

## Transgender issue in Mythology:

In ancient times, transgender individuals were highly esteemed and occupied esteemed positions. Their presence is evident in Indian epics such as The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. In The Ramayana, King Dasharath exiled Lord Rama from the kingdom of Ayodhya for fourteen years to fulfill a vow made to Queen Kaikeyi. A large crowd, including devotees and residents, chose to accompany Rama to demonstrate their loyalty. When Rama reached the kingdom's border, he expressed concern for the well-being of his followers and requested them to return home, saying, 'all men and women of Ayodhya may return to their homes'. The crowd complied with Rama's request and returned to Ayodhya.

**How to cite this paper:** Dolan Ghosh  
"Deconstructing the Hijra Narrative:  
Reimagining Trans Identities through  
Literary Perspectives"

Published in  
International  
Journal of Trend in  
Scientific Research  
and Development  
(ijtsrd), ISSN:  
2456-6470, Volume-8 | Issue-1,  
February 2024, pp.851-856, URL:  
[www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd64520.pdf](http://www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd64520.pdf)



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Scientific Research  
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However, the transgender individuals, being neither strictly men nor women, remained at the border as Rama inadvertently addressed only men and women. Despite enduring homelessness and facing the challenges of weather, including heat, cold, rain, thunder, and lightning, the transgenders patiently waited for Lord Rama's return throughout the fourteen years of his exile.

Upon Rama's triumphant return after the war, he was astonished to discover that the transgender individuals had steadfastly remained in the same place where he had left them. Their unwavering loyalty and resilience were evident as they endured the hardships of the years in anticipation of Lord Rama's homecoming. Deeply moved by the loyalty of the Hijras, Rama granted them a special blessing: the ability to bestow blessings on people during significant events like childbirth and marriage, through a ceremony known as Badhai. This ritual involves the singing, dancing, and blessings imparted by the Hijras.

In The Mahabharata, Arjuna adopts the name Brihannala towards the end of his exile to conceal his identity from the Kauravas. Assuming the role of Thirunangai, he engages in dancing at weddings and performs rituals during childbirth, a tradition now carried on by present-day transgenders. During the Kurukshetra War, Bhishma served as the Chief Commander of the Kauravas, and the Pandavas realized that victory could only be achieved by defeating this formidable warrior. Krishna acknowledged that Bhishma's death was necessary for establishing dharma but revealed the challenge that Bhishma possessed a boon allowing him to choose the timing of his death. Therefore, the focus shifted to incapacitating Bhishma, as outright killing him seemed impossible. There is another transgender figure named Shikhandi, portrayed as such due to a complex series of events. Bhishma, on behalf of his step-brother, won three maids in a swayamvara, and Amba was one of them. Amba was in love with Shalya, but he refused her, advising her to marry Bhishma instead. Bhishma, committed to celibacy, declined to marry her, leading to Amba's deep humiliation and a vow to be the cause of Bhishma's death. In her next birth, as Parashurama, she fought Bhishma but failed in her mission. After undertaking twelve years of severe penance, Lord Shiva granted Amba's requested boon, and she was reborn as Shikhandini. Despite being an exceptional warrior, Shikhandini felt burdened by her femininity. In order to confront the formidable Bhishma during the Kurukshetra war, Shikhandini transformed her gender identity and became a eunuch. Bhishma, upon recognizing Shikhandini, willingly accepted death at her hands.

Another incident was during the impending war between the Pandavas and Kauravas, a human sacrifice to goddess Kali was required. Aravan, the son of Arjuna, volunteered to sacrifice his life for the kingdom but expressed a desire to experience marriage before his death. In response, Lord Krishna transformed into a woman and married Aravan, granting him the joy of marital life. Aravan's wish was fulfilled, and he subsequently sacrificed his life. According to the belief, Lord Krishna continues to be Aravan's wife and grieves the loss of his husband. In ancient times, transgender individuals were highly regarded, and people held them in esteem. Even deities assumed transgender avatars to uphold righteousness and sustain dharma.

### **Transgender in contemporary literature:**

In the contemporary context, the situation has taken a different turn. While Indians are often recognized for their acceptance, tolerance, and respect for others, this is not the case for transgender individuals. Even from a young age, male children displaying any degree of femininity are often subjected to disdain, not only from their parents but also from other family members. These children endure threats, scolding, and even physical abuse. Once rejected by their families, the lives of these transgender individuals become exceedingly challenging. Many are compelled to make a living through means such as prostitution, begging, and participating in traditional ceremonies like weddings and childbirth rituals. While these ceremonies are integral to Indian culture, transgenders are often treated with contempt and disrespect outside of these traditional contexts. Sadly, they are frequently marginalized and face discrimination, not only within their families but also within society at large. As a result of this societal rejection, transgenders often form their own communities for support and understanding.

To understand the conditions of the transgenders in current scenario, some autobiographies and novels like, "I am Vidya" by Living Smile Vidya (2007), "The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story" by Revathi (2010), "Me Hijra Me Laxmi" by Laxminarayan Tripathi (2015), and "A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi" by Manabi Bandyopadhyay (2017), novels like Arundhati Roy's "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" and the poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs" are under discussion.

### **Struggles of Living Smile Vidya:**

"I am Vidya" delves into the experiences of pain and suffering faced by Living Smile Vidya, a transgender individual, throughout her life. Born as a male named Saravanan, she later identified as female and underwent sex reassignment surgery to become

Living Smile Vidya or Smiley. As a transwoman, she encountered numerous challenges and struggles. Living Smile Vidya hails from a family in Attumanthai Street, with a strict father, Ramaswami, and supportive sisters, Manju and Radha. Being the only male child, she faced high expectations and pressure to excel academically. In her childhood, she found solace in expressing her feminine identity by wearing her sister's dresses and engaging in activities typically associated with girls.

Despite her genuine feelings, she faced mockery and criticism from friends and classmates, especially when she moved to Bishop Heber School. A turning point in her life occurred when she met Senthil, a friend who shared similar experiences. This led her to discover a supportive NGO, where she found a community of people like her. Living Smile Vidya pursued her education, completing B.Sc in Computer Science and later MA in Linguistics. Despite her interest in linguistics, she dedicated more time to drama and literature. During this time, she struggled with her gender identity, eventually leading to her association with tirunangais and undergoing a sex reassignment surgery called nirvana.

After moving to Chennai and facing rejection from her family, Living Smile Vidya encountered hardships, including financial struggles. She chose begging for survival over prostitution, facing ridicule, harassment, and injuries. Despite these challenges, she moved to Madurai, where she found support from friends and later secured a job in Coimbatore. In her pursuit of a better life, Living Smile Vidya faced additional hurdles when attempting to change her name on official documents due to her sex reassignment operation. After a lengthy legal process, she finally succeeded. Despite facing constant teasing on her way to work, she found solace in her job at Suyam Trust in Chennai. In the end, Living Smile Vidya's story reflects a journey of resilience and perseverance in the face of societal prejudices and personal challenges.

### **Revathi's journey towards self-discovery and acceptance:**

"The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story" is an autobiography written by Revathi, a transgender rights activist and hijra from Tamil Nadu, India. The book offers a poignant and candid account of Revathi's life, providing readers with insight into the struggles, triumphs, and complexities of being a hijra in India. Revathi begins by describing her early childhood in a rural village and her realization that she was different from others. The narrative unfolds as she navigates the challenges of growing up with a gender identity that did not conform to societal norms. Revathi provides a

glimpse into the discrimination and rejection she faced within her family, school, and community.

The title, "The Truth About Me," signifies Revathi's journey towards self-discovery and acceptance. The term "hijra" refers to a diverse group of transgender individuals in South Asia, often marginalized and subjected to societal prejudice. Revathi shares her experiences of joining the hijra community and the rituals and customs associated with hijra identity. The book delves into the physical and emotional struggles of hijras, including societal stigma, discrimination, and violence. Revathi's narrative is also a testament to the resilience of hijras as they form close-knit communities for support and survival. Throughout the book, Revathi emphasizes the importance of understanding and acknowledging the diversity within the transgender community. She advocates for social acceptance, equal rights, and the recognition of hijras as a legitimate gender identity.

Thus, "The Truth About Me" is not only a personal memoir but also a powerful advocacy tool that sheds light on the experiences of hijras in India. Revathi's narrative challenges stereotypes and promotes empathy, contributing to a broader conversation about gender identity, human rights, and social justice.

### **Challenges faced by Laxmi:**

"Me Hijra Me Laxmi" is an autobiography written by Laxminarayan Tripathi, a prominent hijra activist and a well-known figure in India. The book provides a firsthand account of Laxmi's life, her struggles, and her journey as a hijra in Indian society. Laxminarayan Tripathi, also known as Laxmi, was born into a Brahmin family in Thane, Maharashtra. From a young age, she experienced a sense of gender incongruence and did not conform to traditional gender norms. The book narrates Laxmi's early experiences, including her realization of being different and the challenges she faced within her family and community.

As she grew older, Laxmi became involved with the hijra community, a marginalized and often misunderstood group of transgender individuals in South Asia. The book explores her initiation into the hijra tradition, the rituals, customs, and the formation of a hijra family or "guru-chela" system. Laxmi's narrative goes beyond her personal story and sheds light on the broader issues faced by the hijra community, such as societal discrimination, poverty, and lack of legal recognition. She discusses the struggles for identity, acceptance, and basic human rights that hijras endure in India. One of the significant aspects of the book is Laxmi's activism. She became a vocal advocate for the rights of hijras and the broader LGBTQ+ community in India. Through her autobiography, Laxmi aims to challenge stereotypes,



dispel myths, and foster understanding about hijras. She advocates for social acceptance, legal recognition, and equal rights for the hijra community.

However, "Me Hijra Me Laxmi" is not only a personal memoir but also a powerful tool for raising awareness about the struggles faced by hijras in India. Laxmi's story contributes to the ongoing dialogue about gender identity, human rights, and social justice in the country.

### **Challenges faced by the first transgender principal Manobi Bandyopadhyay:**

Manobi Bandyopadhyay's biography, titled "A Gift of Goddess Lakshmi: A Candid Biography of India's First Transgender Principal," delves into the challenging experiences faced by transgender individuals in their daily lives. Born in 1964 in Chandernagore, Hooghly, Manobi initially named Somnath, faced the societal pressure of being the desired male child after two daughters. Her father viewed her as a "trophy" to showcase to family members who had previously criticized him for not having a son, highlighting the prevailing patriarchal mindset valuing sons as family assets. However, the joy of having a son turned into disappointment when Manobi's parents realized her "nonnormative" gender identity. To protect his wounded pride, Manobi's father, for an extended period, refused to accept his son's non-conforming behavior. Manobi conveys her tragic childhood memory,

"...when I was gradually metamorphosing into someone else right in front of his eyes, the whole world noticed, but my father chose to look the other way for as long as he could". (Bandyopadhyay, p. 6)

The novel portrays traumatic experiences that go beyond the confines of the home and family. Manobi faced ridicule and mistreatment at school due to not conforming to gender-specific norms related to clothing, makeup, and accessories.

The limited educational opportunities available for transgender individuals contribute to lower literacy rates within the community, often pushing them towards engaging in sex work. Despite efforts by some to overcome these challenges, they frequently face violence and abuse, as exemplified by Manobi's experiences. Manobi's situation took a turn for the worse when she secured a position as a lecturer at Vivekananda Satavarshiki Mahavidyalaya, Manikpara, a government college in the rural village of Jhargram. Two fellow lecturers expressed discriminatory views, asserting that "no hijra had the right to become a professor!" (Bandyopadhyay, p. 92). These individuals sought to isolate Manobi by convincing their colleagues to shun her, viewing her as

an "aberration" (Bandyopadhyay, p. 93). Moreover, they subjected Manobi to physical and sexual abuse, compounding the challenges she faced in her professional life. Manobi narrates this traumatic experience as,

"They would lurk in every nook and corner and pull my hair and clothes, saying they wanted to see if my hair was real or if I was wearing a wig. Once, two of them pinned me to the wall and groped me, trying to find out what was beneath my clothes..." (Bandyopadhyay, p. 94)

The distorted reflection of Manobi's true self stemmed from the incongruence between her physical body, gender identity, and body image. Additionally, the text underscores that the mistreatment and harassment faced by transgender individuals persist beyond their transition. Even post-sex change surgery, Manobi continued to be susceptible to discrimination and mistreatment. This is evident in another distressing episode from Manobi's story, where her relationship with Arindam led to a legal dispute. The entire incident was orchestrated by Arindam's brother after Manobi rejected his advances. Subsequently, both brothers falsely accused Manobi of being homosexual, attempting to extort money from her in exchange for dropping the case.

Following the legal dispute, Manobi underwent a degrading experience to affirm her female identity. This involved a medical examination where a group of doctors scrutinized her genitalia. Reflecting on this, Manobi questions the extreme humiliation of such a process, stating, "Could there be anything more insulting than this?" (Bandyopadhyay, p. 153). Despite occurring before the Supreme Court of India's April 15, 2014, decision to officially recognize hijras as the "third gender," Manobi's encounter with state authorities validates the hijra community's apprehensions about potential mistreatment while asserting their identity.

In the biography, it is evident that transgender individuals face discrimination within the medical field also. Manobi recounts an incident with a psychiatrist during a consultation about sex reassignment surgery. Much to her surprise, the psychiatrist tries to persuade Manobi to suppress her identity, highlighting the challenges transgender individuals encounter within the medical establishment. As she depicts, "The doctor told me that I was completely out of my senses and that I should not even remotely try to go for such a surgery because it would ultimately harm me. He asked me to take such destructive thoughts out of my mind and remain a boy." (Bandyopadhyay, p. 33)

The psychiatrist's reaction reflects the stigma and biases present among medical professionals toward transgender individuals. It also highlights their lack of understanding about the health issues affecting the transgender community. The narration of various traumatic episodes experienced by Manobi in her biography plays a crucial role in her healing journey and self-recovery as a transgender individual and transwoman.

Manobi Bandyopadhyay's biography challenges the binary categorization of sex, gender, and sexuality imposed by the prevailing societal model. This model tends to disregard the needs of alternative identities, contributing to the marginalization of such individuals. Despite the Constitutional assurance in India's Preamble of equal rights and opportunities for all citizens without discrimination, the practical implementation of these commitments remains incomplete. Although Article 21 of the Indian Constitution guarantees the 'Right to life and personal liberty' for all, the medical community still discriminates against transgender individuals, violating their right to a life of dignity. This discrimination is evident in Manobi's biography, where she faced stigma, mockery, and bias from medical professionals due to her non-conformity to societal norms.

#### **Arundhati Roy's view on transgender issue in her novel "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness":**

Roy demonstrated that India does not serve as a utopia for hijras; instead, they consistently face exclusion from various social rituals. The country's deep-rooted caste tradition delineates clear boundaries of purity and pollution among different communities. The society exhibits homophobia, treating hijras as less than human. Despite this, hijras endeavor to establish connections with society by participating in various social events such as weddings, births, and housewarming ceremonies.

Hijras engage in activities such as dancing and singing with distinctive voices, offering blessings, and occasionally posing a threat by potentially embarrassing hosts or disrupting events with curses and obscenities. Anjum, in "The Ministry of Utmost Happiness" possessing singing and Quranic recitation skills, faced social prejudice, particularly in her music class, where fellow students teased her about her gender identity. This mockery, like labeling her as both "He" and "She," led Anjum to withdraw from the class to avoid societal abuse, ridicule, and prying curiosity. Isolated at home while her siblings attended school, Anjum felt confined and experiencing trauma and suffocation. Seeking an alternative life outside societal norms, Anjum eventually moved from

Kwabgah to a graveyard, where she discarded her vibrant attire for a more neutral Pathan suit. This transition marked a shift in her identity, as her adopted femininity gave way to her inherent masculine features.

Transforming the cemetery into a makeshift guesthouse, Anjum named it Jannat, meaning paradise. She established a funeral service company catering to marginalized groups. When municipal authorities warned her against living in the graveyard, she defiantly stated that she wasn't "living" there but rather "dying" in it. Anjum's journey from "the world of dreams" to "paradise" was a response to the fear threatening her survival as a transgender individual. The graveyard, in her eyes, underscored her plight in the world, symbolizing a state of void and non-existence. By referring to the graveyard as paradise, Anjum attempted to confront the fear of her mortality, challenging the dichotomy between the living and the dead, existence and non-existence in her quest to reconcile the ambivalent nature of her being. She found solace and acceptance when "Ziauddin, the blind imam...befriended her and started visiting her" (p. 3). The author emphasized her individuality, stating,

"It doesn't matter. I'm all of them. I'm Romi and Juli, I'm Laila and Majnu. And Mujna, why not? Who says my name is Anjum? I'm not Anjum, I'm Anjuman. I'm a mehfil, I'm a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing. Is there anyone else you would like to invite? Everyone's invited" (Roy, 2017, p. 4).

Despite facing numerous challenges in conventional social settings, Anjum made efforts to adapt to the evolving world. The crucial call is for individuals to step forward and address the discrimination and economic struggles experienced by transgender individuals. This study highlights that hijras are indeed human beings and have the right to lead a life of dignity. The current societal environment subjects trans women to hardships, emphasizing the urgent need for change. The world must evolve, recognizing that gender holds no significance when it comes to the fundamental acceptance of the human heart. Acknowledging individuals for who they are remains paramount. Gender transitions should not alter the universal experiences of emotions, pain, suffering, care, love, and anger. When society fails to grasp this reality, it leads to the expression of grievances and protests. Just as feminists emerged in response to the marginalization of women, the present world demands a similar uprising for the transgender community after enduring significant hardships.

### Transgender aspects in Kamala Das's poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs":

In Kamala Das's poem "The Dance of the Eunuchs," the theme of transgender identity and the societal challenges faced by eunuchs is prominently explored. The poem delves into the unique position of eunuchs in society, highlighting their marginalized existence and the struggles for acceptance.

The dance performed by the eunuchs is portrayed as a celebration of their identity. Despite societal marginalization, the eunuchs find empowerment in expressing their true selves through dance. The poem suggests that their dance is a powerful form of self-affirmation. Kamala Das sheds light on the social alienation and stigma faced by eunuchs. The use of vivid imagery and descriptive language conveys the challenges and prejudices they confront. The dance becomes a medium through which they assert their humanity and challenge societal norms. The poem reflects the eunuchs' yearning for acceptance and understanding. Their dance is not just a performance; it is a plea for recognition and compassion from a society that often marginalizes and stigmatizes them. The title itself, "The Dance of the Eunuchs," suggests a desire to be seen and acknowledged.

Kamala Das explores the intersectionality of identity within the eunuch community. The term "eunuch" often encompasses a range of gender identities, and the poem hints at the diversity within this group. Each individual, despite sharing a common label, has a unique identity and story. The act of dancing is presented as a form of resistance against societal oppression. The eunuchs reclaim their agency through this artistic expression, challenging stereotypes and asserting their right to be visible and appreciated.

In "The Dance of the Eunuchs," Kamala Das tackles the transgender issue by humanizing and giving voice to a community often subjected to discrimination and misunderstanding. The poem serves as a poignant commentary on the importance of acceptance, empathy, and recognizing the intrinsic humanity of individuals regardless of their gender identity.

### Conclusion:

Life of Transgender in our society exemplified the hardships and obstacles experienced by all transgender individuals in our society. These individuals are not afforded the freedom to lead a life as normal as that of other genders. Instead, they face insults and humiliation from society. It is crucial to grant transgenders the freedom to live a life that is just as normal as that of any other person. Rarely does

our society acknowledge or show concern for the trauma, agony, and pain experienced by members of the transgender community. There is a lack of understanding and appreciation for the genuine feelings of those whose identity does not align with their biological sex. The transgender community often faces ridicule and abuse in various public spaces such as railway stations, bus stands, schools, workplaces, malls, theaters, and hospitals. They are marginalized and treated as outcasts, highlighting a societal failure to accept and embrace diverse gender identities and expressions. It is essential to recognize that the root of the problem lies in the unwillingness of society to evolve its mindset, a perspective that urgently needs to change.

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